

Christianity is a Way of Life

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I mentioned last week that we have entered the season of Lent. This season is one of those strange things that Christians do. Even stranger is one of the practices of this season—repentance. It's a countercultural practice which goes completely against the spirit of our age.

We don't much like self-denial or discipline. Indeed, the motto for our time might well be "We want what we want, and we want it right now." Ours is a time of instant gratification. We can get almost anything we want immediately, or with next day delivery. We have lost any sense of saving up for something or delaying our pleasure until we can afford it. From instant credit to fast food, it's all mostly at our fingertips, ready to satisfy our cravings. Of course, it's only true for those not living in poverty.

In such a time, imagine the power of being willing to "give something up for Lent." Imagine being willing to discipline yourself for a season so you might go deeper on a spiritual level. Imagine being willing to deny yourself for a season in order to experience life more deeply and profoundly on the other side.

That's the gift of repentance. I told the story of Ralph, who was able to live between the steps. "I learned how to get everything I could out of the moment between when I picked up my foot, and when I put it down again. Every step I took was a whole new world." The goal of repentance is to see life in a new way as something infinitely precious and fragile.

Another word for it is mindfulness, the practice of learning to live thoughtfully. Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk who died just over a year ago, writes, "Our effort is to practice mindfulness in each moment, to know what is going on within and around us. Most of the time we are lost in the past or carried away by future projects and concerns. When we are mindful, touching deeply the present moment, we can see and listen deeply, and the fruits are always understanding, acceptance, love, and the desire to relieve suffering and bring joy."

It strikes me that this Buddhist practice is a life marked by openness to the Spirit, however she might come to us. One of the goals of giving something up for a season is to help us discern how we might be fully present to the spirit who fills life with goodness, hope, and joy.

This was certainly how Jesus lived as he is portrayed in the gospels. He was fully present to the people in his life. He loved the world enough to pay it mind. For Jesus, God was fully present in everything and everyone. Jesus lived with mindfulness.

When you read the gospels from this perspective, you will see how open Jesus was to every person around him and to the presence of God in everything. He lived fully between the steps and gathered a group of men and women around him to learn from him how to become mindful. He taught them to look for and to notice God's presence in the world around them. Look at the lilies. Watch the birds. See each person around you, the poor, the children, the widows, the ones thrown on the garbage heap by society. Pay attention! Follow me! Be open to God's spirit at work in the world.

Jesus taught us to live in this way. Christian faith is not a set of doctrines. It is primarily a way of living, a way of acting, a way of being. Jesus's invitation was not "Come, believe what I believe." Jesus invited us to "Follow me."

Too often, the church has gotten this wrong. They got it backward. Church hierarchies have told us that we must believe certain things and act in certain ways in order to belong. That wasn't Jesus's way. He simply invited people to follow him, to be part of his community, to learn the nearness of God in the everyday ordinary events of life.

As Richard Rohr puts it, "Christianity is a lifestyle—a way of being in the world that is simple, non-violent, shared, and loving. However, we made it into an established 'religion' (and all that goes with that) and avoided the lifestyle change itself. One could be warlike, greedy, racist, selfish, and vain in most of Christian history, and still believe that Jesus is one's 'personal Lord and Saviour. The world has no time for such silliness anymore. The suffering on earth is too great."

The church, in all its many forms, has failed the world. We have huddled behind our walls instead of moving out into the world with love and compassion. We have been judgmental rather than loving and compassionate. We have excluded people because they dared to think or live or behave differently than we do rather than welcoming them with open arms to enrich our own lives.

I am no longer particularly interested in keeping the institution of the church going. In thinking this way, I want to echo the early prophets of Israel in the 8th century BCE, who were convinced that God was not interested in worship when there is no justice, no peace, no love, no compassion in the land. Amos puts these words in the mouth of God: "I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies ... Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

This Lent, I want to live more mindfully. I want to live with hope as I live thoughtfully by paying attention to the needs of others and reaching out in love and with compassion.